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Service by the Educated Negro

**By
Roscoe
Conkling
Bruce**



SERVICE BY THE EDUCATED NEGRO
ADDRESS OF ROSCOE CONKLING BRUCE
OF TUSKEGEE INSTITUTE AT THE COM-
MENCEMENT EXERCISES OF THE M STREET
HIGH SCHOOL METROPOLITAN A. M. E.
CHURCH WASHINGTON, D. C., JUNE 16, 1903

LOAN STACK

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C. W. B. Bruce

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When George William Curtis had received from Harvard her greatest degree, he arose at the Alumni Dinner and said, "In the old Italian story the nobleman turns out of the hot street crowded with eager faces into the coolness and silence of his palace. As he looks at the pictures of the long line of ancestors he hears a voice,—or is it his own heart beating?—which says to him noblesse oblige. The youngest scion of the oldest house is pledged by all the virtues and honor of his ancestry to a life not unworthy his lineage. . . . When I came here I was not a nobleman, but to-day I have been ennobled. The youngest doctor of the oldest school, I too, say with the Italian, noblesse oblige. I am pledged by all the honorable traditions of the noble family into which I am this day adopted". . . . You, my friends, are ennobled by the diploma of a school, rich in traditions of high endeavor and actual service. Shall those traditions fail to enter your hearts, and to quicken your energies, and to chasten your ambitions? This question you are not now competent to answer, and you will not be competent until you have lived your lives.

Your equipment for the business of life is not contemptible. As workers you have some acquaintance with the natural resources of our country, and the ways in which they have been utilized in the production and distribution of commodities through the perfecting of industrial organization and the applying of science to work. More, importantly, you possess in varying degrees a group of valuable

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industrial qualities,—that ambition without which work is drudgery and enlargement of life unsought and unattainable; that habit of earnest endeavor which, established by continuous attention to Greek or Latin, mathematics or history, may be utilized in the school room, or on the farm, or in the court room; that habit of self-control which enables men to sacrifice vagrant impulse to sober duty; that resourcefulness which discovers better methods of getting work done; that directing intelligence by which one man can effectively organize for a given purpose, many materials and many workers. In addition to the knowledge and the qualities I have mentioned, most of you have a settled disposition toward some form of self-support appropriate to an exceptional training; while you know that some men must black other men's boots, you also know that a boot-black with a high school diploma at home means waste—waste of time, waste of money, waste of education. Moreover, you appreciate the duties and value the privileges of citizenship in a democracy, and most of you have on the whole a serious intent to do what you reasonably can to promote the general welfare. Such is your equipment as citizens. Finally, as human beings, you are able to participate in the intellectual, æsthetic, and moral interests of cultivated people. How may you with such equipment be really useful under the conditions of American life? That is our problem.

And right here let me say that nobody wishes you to make a profession of uplifting your race. In the first place, that's a pretty big job; and in the second place, your race is uplifted whenever one of you manages well a truck farm, a grocery store, a school room, or a bank. Charity begins at home; your chief business should

be to uplift each himself.) My present purpose, however, is to consider mainly how such individual success may contribute to the welfare of the many.

Let us consider, first of all, how you may be of direct service by work in which the chief factor is personal influence and by work in which the chief factor is directing intelligence.

Teaching is an art inseparable from the personality of the teacher,—an art in which a mature person seeks by personal influence to help immature persons build their characters soundly. Teaching ability, to adapt the words of Cardinal Newman, “is not a mere extrinsic or accidental advantage which is ours to-day and another’s to-morrow, which may be got up from a book and easily forgotten again, which we can command or communicate at our pleasure, which we can borrow for the occasion, carry about in our hands and take into the market; it is an acquired illumination, it is a habit, a personal possession and an inward endowment”. The best way to become a good teacher is, therefore, to become a good man or a good woman, and to grow in power to interest and influence young people. Such personality and power cannot be manufactured to order, but are slowly developed by much reading and thinking and doing and no little contact with wholesome people. In Charles Francis Adams’ pungent address, at Cambridge in 1883, he said, “In these days of repeating rifles, my alma mater sent me and my classmates out into the strife equipped with shields and swords and javelins. We were to grapple with living questions through the medium of the dead languages.” While thus sharply criticizing the content of the curriculum, Mr. Adams would have been the

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first to maintain that to breathe the atmosphere of a university is an assured way of getting broadened culture, and that this atmosphere is made largely by the teachers. Frederick Douglass had no university degree, but he was certainly a man of culture; his teachers were among the choicest spirits of an aroused generation—Sumner and Garrison and Wendell Phillips—and they gave him breadth and balance and clear-sightedness. Charles Francis Adams was set upon the highway of modern culture despite the curriculum; Douglass received that grace which is of the spirit of literature without the curriculum. Both men were deeply indebted to noble teachers. The thing that makes one man really different from another is not so much knowledge as character; and the thing that makes one school different from another is not so much curriculum and apparatus, as teaching body. Algebra and trigonometry, Greek and Latin, history and political economy, the student will forget; but he will not forget a teacher gentle but earnest, of disinterested scholarship and life-long devotion. The specific teaching may be quite erased from the memory, but in the heart will be left a deepening respect for the teacher.

Many of you are to become class-room teachers. Remember that teaching ability is an inward endowment; remember that a morally stunted man or a ribbon-loving woman cannot be an effective teacher. The most searching critic of character I ever knew was a barefoot boy whose laughing eyes danced over the pages of the fourth reader; an intuitive philosopher he! School boy opinion has, I doubt not, many vagaries but on the whole its essential decisions as to teachers are amazingly correct. Whether you teach geography by the Oswego Method, is not greatly to the

point; whether you have won the confidence of your class—that is the main issue; and that conquest is not made by the sword of discipline but by the spirit of vigorous goodness.

Moreover the genuine teacher knows that his duty is not bounded by the four walls of the class-room. He is dealing with boys and girls to be sure, but he is dealing with more—with social conditions. The life and work of the community he must study quite as much as he must study the child. Indeed, child and man are largely products of social conditions. The educated teacher, by friendly visits to homes and by cheerful work in churches and societies, will seek to elevate community opinion and the standard of life and work. A crowded unclean home in an undrained street, is almost as much an object of concern to the educated teacher as is a hopeless little dunce who can't spell "rabbit!" Let us ground child-study in community study.

This knowledge of the life and work of the community will react upon the program of study. The educated teacher, I have said, aims at raising somewhat the level of life in the community. The program of study is an instrument for that end. A school unresponsive to the needs of actual life is a school preparing for Utopia. The universities and the public schools of the Western States illustrate what I mean: for example, the University of California has recently introduced a course in irrigation. And here in the East, Cornell teaches poultry raising. For an unscrubbed population the school should emphasize cleanliness; for a propertyless population, foresight and thrift. Let me speak even more definitely. In this city of Washington, as in other urban communities, the death rate of the Negro population is exceedingly high. This excessive death rate

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is due to a variety of causes; relatively low economic position is a powerful cause. Thus, one of the largest industrial insurance companies in the United States finds, I learn, that the death rate of Negroes is practically the same as that of whites, in approximately the same industrial occupations; and there is much more evidence to the same effect. In addition to the teaching of hygiene, the school may aim to remedy the conditions expressed in the high death rate, in two ways,—first, through imparting productive capacity by the training of hands; and second, through developing wants by the touching of hearts and arousing of minds.

Already you have a manual training high school and through the grades certain work in carpentry and sewing and cooking. The increasing efficiency of all such work should be welcomed and actively aided by every educated teacher. After a while, let us hope, the schools here will offer from one end to the other, such teaching of the industrial arts as will prepare students worthily to maintain themselves under severe economic stress. Do you realize that, despite the enlargement of educational opportunities in Washington and the growth of the Negro population, there are probably here to-day fewer Negro artisans than there were in 1870? Here is a profound need, and for the schools a rare opportunity. Moreover, the school life of most children is short, not over five or six years. If the school possessed adequate facilities for giving industrial capacity, more parents would be willing and able to let their children remain in school seven and eight and nine years. The schools and the cultivated portion of this community cannot afford to give those who ask for bread a stone. We

must send the whole boy to school and not merely his head!

Not for a moment do I decry that important function of the schools, which I have called the development of wants. Human wants are social forces. Corn and cotton are grown to supply certain bodily wants; the fine arts are cultivated in response to certain æsthetic wants; philosophy and pure science are elaborated at the quiet insistence of certain intellectual wants; religion is preached to assuage certain spiritual wants. Every voluntary act is the handmaid of some want. Now, it is the fundamental business of the schools to enlarge the range of the students' interests and wants, to stir up a divine discontent. The saddest thing about the Negro peasant in his windowless cabin in Georgia, the saddest thing about the Negroes in the filthy shanties of Mobile, New York, and Washington, is not so much poverty, as slovenly unconcern. What all such people need—be they white or black, red or yellow—is the development of wants—wants for better things. A man of moderately developed wants will exert himself to get a steady job under healthful conditions, to get a comfortable house to live in—three or four sunny, pleasantly furnished rooms and, if possible a garden for vegetables and flowers—yes, he will exert himself to win a wife to make that house a home. Such wants (and they are, you will note, not impossibly spiritual) every school ought to tend to develop.

In short, the development of the wants of sober men and the giving of the skill to buy the means of satisfying those wants—these two things are vital to the work of the school. Let me be clearly understood; the school should of course develop the more spiritual wants, wants for the things that give literature and art and religion their values.

These spiritual things are the headwaters of the fullest and deepest and highest enjoyments of life. But these matters have long been emphasized in the traditions of school-men; moreover, when the flesh is weak, the spirit is not very strong. My wish just now is to emphasize the things that lie at the basis of race maintenance and progress.

The considerations brought forward exhibit the opportunities of the teacher and the high significance of the teacher's work.

Teaching and preaching are very much alike. Phillips Brooks said very truly that preaching is the bringing of truth through personality. Some of you will prepare yourselves to preach; all of you will have to do with preachers. There is no lack of preachers but there is much lack of good preachers. The preacher has the entree to the firesides of the people. The educated preacher, like the educated teacher, realizes the profound effect that the housing of the working classes exerts upon the morals and the efficiency and the happiness of the working classes, the profound effect that surroundings exert upon life and character. The preacher will use some of the influence that issues from his superrational functions to make the homes of the people hygienically as well as morally clean, to make those homes more attractive than the resorts of vice.

Religion and the Church have, from a certain point of view, two main functions,—first to make peace between human society and assumed spiritual beings; and, second, to antagonize anti-social acts and tendencies. The first function, religion performs for a horde of man-eating savages as well as for the congregation of St. Paul's; the second function religion performs, characteristically in a civilized society,

by allying itself with morality. The surprisingly low death rate of Jews wherever found is unquestionably due in large part to this alliance of religion and morality. In our English Bible we find:—

“And God spake all these words, saying,

“Honour thy father and thy mother. . . .

“Thou shalt not kill.

“Thou shalt not commit adultery.

“Thou shalt not steal.

“Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbour.

“Though shalt not covet thy neighbour’s house, thou shalt not covet thy neighbour’s wife, . . . nor anything that is thy neighbour’s.

“And all the people saw the thunderings, and the lightnings, and the noise of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking” . . .

Now, the practical usefulness of the preacher lies largely in the fact that he supplies the sanctions for right doing,—the thunderings and the lightnings and the noise of the trumpet, the mountain smoking, and in all but above all Jehovah. To show the man in the street or in the cotton field that for him lying and stealing are bad because, if everybody were a liar and a thief, society would fall to pieces,—that would be very well, but it would hardly make the man honest in word and deed. If, however, you marshal feelings of awe and reverence in defence of honesty, if you get God on your side, your success is more assured and you may develop a “sensibility to principle which feels a stain like a wound.” The preacher fortifies the common moralities with these religious sanctions and that is no easy busi-

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ness. The preacher must himself be righteous, resourceful, sympathetic, with the gift of nearness to men. Such qualities education is peculiarly fit to bestow or to develop, and hence an educated ministry is sorely needed by our people from Boston to New Orleans.

An educated ministry would realize that social settlements, gymnasiums, kindergartens, day nurseries, friendly visiting, homes for defectives and orphans and the aged may fitly and usefully be organized and maintained by the church. By such means the church may tend to establish a kingdom of heaven on earth.

Among cultivated Negroes there is apparent an unfortunate tendency to look at preachers askance. This is due largely to reaction against bad preachers, and to failure to understand and appreciate the temporal opportunities of the Church. I argue for the usefulness of good preachers and of the "institutional" church. Though no member of this graduating class should become a preacher or a preacher's wife, every member may wisely ally himself with the church and use his personal influence to enlarge and strengthen church work, to make it definite and human and nobly practical.

So much for the work in which personal influence is the determining factor. Medicine and business are types of the work in which what I have rudely called directing intelligence determines.

In the profession of medicine, I admit, personal influence and directing intelligence subtly interlace. The Negro doctor's social position makes him specially accessible to Negroes in cases of need. As a friend of the family or of the family's friends, the doctor is not dreaded as a feel-

ingless stranger with a terrible knife. Moreover, the Negro doctor does not feel himself a man of alien blood come to tend an inferior. Social position and understanding sympathy, then, render the Negro doctor readily accessible and very useful. Moreover, the Negro's physical condition offers the doctor large opportunities for noble service. In a book upon "Ethnic Factors in the Population of Boston," Doctor Bushee says, "In Boston the mortality of the Negro is much larger than that of any other ethnic factor"; again, "A high death rate, instead of a low birth rate is causing the Negroes to disappear"; and the statistics are not much more encouraging in many other urban communities North and South. That relatively low economic position is a powerful factor in producing this alarming death rate, I have already suggested; another capital factor is pitiable ignorance of the rudiments of personal hygiene and of sanitation. Negro doctors may without much trouble diffuse throughout a community these rudiments of knowledge and in so doing will prove themselves public servants. North and South the conspicuous financial success and substantial social service of hundreds of Negro doctors eloquently establish the correctness of this view; and of practising physicians, the Negro people to-day have unmistakably too few.

What of the Negro business man? In Washington public employment and the professions have captured most of the energetic and alert Negroes, to the injury of business development. Springfield, Massachusetts; Richmond, Virginia; Dayton, Ohio,—not one of these important cities has a total population as large as the Negro population of the District of Columbia. As buyers of goods, eighty-seven

thousand people are important; but as sellers of goods, the eighty-seven thousand Negroes in Washington are by no means important. For example, of the total profits on the dry goods bought in a year by the Negro population of Washington,—profits amounting to thousands and thousands of dollars, for the ratio of expenditure to income is exceptionally large,—what per cent. goes to Negro merchants? Shall I say five per cent., one percent., or one thousandth of one per cent.? Mathematical precision is, of course, not possible but you and I know that practically none of these profits go to Negro merchants. And you and I could name a dozen white merchants who have been enriched by those profits. And in consideration of this fact how many Negro clerks have the white merchants placed in their stores? how many Negro floor walkers? how many Negro buyers? And, my friends, how many thousands of years must elapse before the Washington Negro will add to his culture enough co-operative endeavor and competitive power to change all this? I myself have never yet been convinced that the Anglo-Saxon and the Jew really need the black man's charity. Though I cannot point out, then, to the members of this graduating class openings in established business houses, I can point out that their success in business will provide opportunities for some later class, and will help to make the spending of Negroes enrich Negroes. Let me suggest two other ways in which the Negro business men may be of great service to the many. In the first place, the rents charged Negroes in cities, for example, Washington, are considerably higher for the same accommodations than the rents charged white people. By offering good houses at reasonable rents to the Negro working

class, the Negro business man will find a paying investment and a means of much service. In the second place, hotels, restaurants, and theatres even in the capital of the nation are open to black men and women only on degrading terms, or not open at all. The closing of such accommodations is really the opening for black business men of the doors of opportunity.

In discussing ways of direct service I have then mentioned teaching and preaching as types of the work in which the decisive factor is personal influence. Medicine and business I have mentioned as types of the work in which the decisive factor is directing intelligence.

And now I wish to discuss two ways in which educated Negroes may be of indirect service,—first, by offering their fellows copies for imitation, and, second, by establishing the dignity of the race. In 1881, hardly a white man or a black man in the country dreamed that in twenty-two years a Negro would have achieved the building of a beautiful city in a Southern wilderness, would have organized efficiently the business of that industrial community of some 1700 people, would have won the abiding confidence of white men and black men North and South, would have brought the white North and the white South into intelligent co-operation in the uplifting of black men, would have worked out a solution for the central problem in American education, would have been acknowledged master of arts by the oldest university in the land, would have written one of the impressive books of the century, would have been asked by the British Government for help in the reconstruction of South Africa, would have been called by the sanest of British critics of affairs the most notable figure in the

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American Republic! And yet, this miracle you and I see to-day with our own eyes. The example of this man is being imitated in a hundred educational and industrial communities in the Southern States. And all men feel more respect for the Negro race because out of its loins has come Booker T. Washington.

A constructive statesman like Washington, educators like Lewis Moore and Lucy Moten and your own Anna Cooper, theologians like Bowen and Grimke, scholars like Blyden and Scarborough and DuBois and Kelly Miller, inventors like Woods and McCoy, a novelist like Chesnutt, a poet like Dunbar, a musician like Coleridge-Taylor, a painter like Tanner—yes, and, of those who are gone, Banneker who searched the heavens; Toussaint, soldier and statesman; Aldridge, the tragedian with his first medal in arts and sciences from the King of Prussia; Pushkin, the the poet of the Russias; Dumas, father and son; the saintly Crummel; and Douglass the argument for freedom,—I say, the indirect service of such people is incalculable.

Now, for you and me no such careers are probable and yet every educated Negro who is worth his salt, is in similar fashion a copy for imitation and serves to secure respect for his race. The Negro contractor and builder; the Negro who owns a well managed truck farm; the Negro school teacher, who has saved money enough to buy municipal bonds or shares in a railway,—that person becomes in a money getting time a definite and concrete argument to

ite men and to black men that black men can be more than hewers of wood and drawers of water, than cooks and coachmen. Fundamentally, you and I by our thoughtfulness, our practical interest in the happiness of others, our

elevation above petty prejudice, our simplicity, our decisive prudence, our enduring energy, our devotion, may indirectly count for good in a thousand ways in the life and work of our communities.

And, now, my friends, you enter the circle of educated men and women. Your personal influence will be felt in school room and in pulpit. Your directing intelligence will count in law, and medicine, and business; as able and devoted men and women, you by your examples will steady the nerves of a staggering people and make the word Negro more than a reproach. Delicate indecision, hesitant virtue, carping discontent, bric-a-brac culture—these ill become stalwart men and robust women. By all the honorable traditions of the noble family into which you are now adopted, you are pledged not to pick your way daintily in the soft places of the earth; you are pledged to make your lives real, useful, constructive. Remember—noblesse oblige!

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